DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 290 CE 066 923

AUTHOR	Smith, Thomas B.
TITLE	Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring. A Guide for Head Start Teachers.
INSTITUTION	Pittsburgh Univ., PA. Generations Together.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. for Literacy, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	94
NOTE	21p.; For a related report, see CE 066 922.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; Adult Learning; Cooperative Programs; Demonstration Programs; Institutional Cooperation; *Intergenerational Programs; *Learning Activities; *Mentors; *Older Adults; Outcomes of Education; Preschool Education; Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Program Implementation; Recruitment; *Teaching Methods; *Tutoring; Tutors
IDENTIFIERS	*Family Literacy; Pennsylvania (Allegheny County); Pennsylvania (Beaver County); Project Head Start

ABSTRACT

This guide was developed during a demonstration project conducted in three diverse, multiethnic Western Pennsylvania communities to use older adult tutors as mentors to improve Head Start parents' literacy skills and ability to develop their children's literacy. The guide is intended to facilitate tutors' learning about family literacy and to give them guidelines for working with families and making home visits. The guide includes the following: information on family literacy; a rationale for and description for the project, tips for getting started (characteristics of adult learners, techniques for teaching adults, clarifying goals, and establishing a relationship); ideas for keeping it going (teaching the parents); and wrapping it up (some examples of outcomes as reported by mentors and parents). Appendixes includes a checklist of home visiting tips and a starter list of family literacy activities (KC)

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Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring

A Guide for Head Start Teachers

by

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1994

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Special thanks to the Beaver and Allegheny County Project Mentors, without whose sensitivity and hard work there would have been no project:

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Home-Based Family Literacy Mentoring:
A Guide for Head Start Teachers

INTRODUCTION

What is "family literacy"?

To the general public, the word "literacy" means the ability to read. Of course, there are many ways to think about this basic ability, including levels of reading proficiency and the ability to write as well as read. Lately, some experts have even recommended that basic math skills should be included in a broad definition of literacy.

It is also true that "the ability to read," even at its most basic level, involves a number of skills besides letter recognition and knowing how to start at the proper side of the page. These skills include:

- Social and emotional development (children who feel good about themselves are more open to and capable of learning).
- Physical development (seeing, hearing, sitting still and holding a book!).
- Cognitive development (the ability to think symbolically; the use of language).

A good preschool curriculum contains a rich mixture of activities that teach, reinforce, and otherwise develop these basic abilities. As preschool teachers know well, however, their efforts are much more successful if these elements are also found at home, not necessarily in the form of structured activities, but in the form of experiences that support a child's self-image while challenging him or her to stretch the body and the mind.

The concept of "family literacy," then, grew out of the understanding that children's homes — families — play an important role in the development of pre-reading skills, and the ability to read. It has expanded to include some other critical factors:

- Children's early experiences with reading, especially being read to.
- The family's use of reading, as recreation or as a way of gathering information.

Family literacy, then, is a concept which recognizes the family as the primary system for the transmission of values from adults to children. It focuses on this

family system, in an attempt to help the adults — especially parents — understand the power of their influence on the intellectual development of their children. To become literate, children must *value* literacy; without this key ingredient, no special method or curriculum will be successful.

Family literacy practitioners develop activities that help parents understand and make the best use of their power, and provide training for parents through workshops or home visits. The home-visiting tips in this guide were collected during an intergenerational family literacy project that was designed to test and refine a new way to reach parents, and families, with the family literacy message.

Project Rationale and Description

In the early spring of 1993, nine older adults (age 55+) from two counties in Western Pennsylvania were recruited for a family literacy project. This project was funded by the National Institute for Literacy, which was seeking new models for encouraging literacy; the project partners were Generations Together: An Intergenerational Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh; Beaver County Head Start; and COTRAIC Head Start in Allegheny County. The older adult volunteers were trained in home-visiting and family literacy techniques, and each was matched with two or three families recruited from the participating Head Start systems. They were charged with becoming "Family Literacy Mentors," visiting their families at least one hour per week and supporting the development of literacy awareness and activities.

The mentors visited their families through the summer and into the fall of 1993, helping with the Head Start child's transition to Kindergarten. During that period, the mentors kept journals and met regularly with project staff members, who tracked their progress through extensive debriefing. The parents who participated in this project were also interviewed, and some kept their own journals.

The tips that are presented in this handbook were gleaned from those comments, and reflect the excitement and satisfaction that was felt by the participating mentors. children, and parents.

HOME-BASED FAMILY LITERACY MENTORING:
A GUIDE FOR HEAD START TEACHERS

GETTING STARTED

Teaching Adults: Characteristics

As a beginning, a home visitor must have some basic knowledge and understanding of the adults with whom he or she is working. Such knowledge and understanding will help you create a supportive and productive informal learning environment.

When designing a learning experience for adults, you should consider some general characteristics of adult learning styles:

- Adults bring their lifetime of background, skills and experience to any learning situation.
- Adults approach new concepts with a problem-centered orientation. They expect their skills and knowledge to apply directly to a specific life situation.
- Adults are motivated to learn by their need for self-esteem, self-confidence, and creative expression. Also, their willingness to learn is directly connected to the desire to improve the quality of their lives.
- Adult learners need to integrate new ideas into the body of knowledge they already possess. This integration takes more time if there is little overlap with previous knowledge.
- Adult learners need to participate in their own learning, and respond positively when given the opportunity to contribute.
- Adult learners bring values, beliefs, and ideas to the learning environment that may be in conflict with contemporary views. It is important to recognize a variety of values as valid and appropriate for discussion.

You will have to be sensitive to the developmental levels of the parents with whom you are working. In some cases, their life experiences may be fairly limited, and their reactions may reflect this. As one project mentor commented, "[The

mother's] skills were very basic, and she didn't know where to start." These parents may tend to take their errors personally and are more likely to let them affect their self esteem. They may also become dependent upon you in ways that are not growth-enhancing.

Other parents in learning situations may experience internal conflict when they find other people telling them what they need to know or do. During these visits, resistance can be worked through if you try to view parents' "mistakes" or "differences of opinion" as opportunities for learning.

Teaching Adults: Techniques

As you get to know the families you are visiting, you may want to establish routines that include some of the following teaching methods:

- Role play, which enables the parents to exercise their new skills in combination with previous experience and knowledge.
- Problem-solving, which engages a parent in the process of working through critical issues.
- Systematic review, which can help parents organize and focus on the main points of the material they are learning. Adult learners benefit especially when a review strategy uses a variety of approaches.
- Practice sessions, which provide parents with the opportunity to use their new skills, knowledge, and get immediate feedback.

Your fundamental task as a home visitor is to create and maintain a relaxed, positive approach to the teaching experience. From the beginning, parents must be active partners in diagnosing their needs and formulating objectives in the context of their parenting. Such partnering is consistent with an adult learner's need to continually formulate his or her own life objectives in relationship to changing situations.

Clarifying Your Goals

In a family literacy project, your goals are centered only indirectly upon the children. Your primary "target" is the *family*, and your activities can include any family member — parents, especially, but also older children, younger children, grandparents, cousins, and so forth. You are trying to increase the parents'

understanding of family-literacy concepts, and to help them create a family atmosphere that fosters literacy-reinforcing activities. Your success will be measured at first by an increase in such parent-initiated activities; noticeable differences in the children's literacy skills may not be evident for some time.

Parents' reasons for volunteering to participate in the project, however, focused directly on the immediate needs of their children, as reflected in the following comments by the parents in out 1993 program:

- "My four-year-old is slow and impatient and already behind."
- "My eight-year-old is slow, my four-year-old is bright. I'd like to help all four of my children."
- One mother said she hoped that the program would help her son to learn to paint and color himself, instead of depending on her to do it
- A mother explained that her daughter was extremely shy.
- Many parents were worried about students needing to know how to do particular things like name, telephone number, etc., in order to pass a kindergarten screening.

You can see from these examples that, while parents' concerns did center around their children's ability to achieve, they were not specifically interested at first in learning about their own role in this process. It's quite likely that any parent, anticipating a home visit, has a set of expectations (or hopes) that only matches yours at the most basic level, i.e. the success of his or her child. The parent is asking, in effect: "What can you do for my child?" In fact, you too are concerned with the child's development, and parents should be clear about this.

What you are going to do for the child, however, is to help the *parents*, to give them the understanding and the tools they need to fulfill their role as the child's first and best teacher. Parents with low self-esteem may have trouble making this conceptual shift, as will those parents who are used to receiving help for their children that disregards their own contributions. One parent expressed this attitude eloquently:

> "[The teacher] should know more about her job than I do.
> I know my child, but she knows how to educate him."

As a result, many of the literacy project mentors found it difficult to engage the parents, many of whom tended to look upon the visit as a chance to *get away* from

the kids for awhile. The mentors also found that they themselves had difficulty maintaining their focus on the family.

The bonding that occurs with these children, who are often by definition somewhat deprived of adult contact, is powerful and satisfying and tends to be exclusive. A field trip to the library, for example, may be great fun and very satisfying for a mentor and a child; it does not address family literacy goals unless mom (or dad) comes along.

Maintaining a focus on the parents as primary targets, then, takes some conscious effort on your part. You must make your expectations clear from the start, of course, and be sure to plan activities that will engage the parent as well as the child. It's also a good idea to review your plans with another member of your team (supervisor, teacher, fellow home-visitor), and to listen if he or suggests that you're beginning to focus a little too tightly on your relationship with the child.

Establishing a Relationship

Another key ingredient in maintaining your "family" focus is the development of a solid relationship with the parent(s). Their willingness to join in with your activities, and their openness to the possibilities you are presenting, is directly related to the quality of your relationship, and the level of trust you have established.

Some parents are more willing to trust than others, but none will offer it immediately, without any effort on your part. Your first steps toward your family literacy goals must focus on establishing a trusting relationship.

None of the participating parents mentioned their own needs — for support, friendship, and assistance — in the early phases of the project. However, many identified their relationship with a new friend as a special and important positive outcome. The mentors also found this aspect of the project to be particularly rewarding, and felt that it had an indirect but powerful impact on the children's literacy and learning.

As you make your visits, then, consider these keys to building relationships:

- Make an initial visit in the company of someone whom the family already knows.

- Communicate as clearly as possible your plans for the visits — what you will do, how long you will stay, what you expect from other family members.

- Remember that the parents are probably more anxious than you; after all, they are sharing a lot of personal information with a near-stranger!

  > "I'm copying these notes [later] because of the mother's anxiety about wanting everything to go well. . . my first time there."

- Make the initial getting-to-know-one-another period a sharing time.

  > "I told her some about myself and she in turn told me about herself. She has had a very difficult life."

- Maintain a positive, nonjudgmental attitude towards the parent.

  > "[The] mothers reach out to me, someone who's not at all threatening."

- Treat your time with the family as a learning *partnership*; be conscientious about getting the parents' input and opinions.

  > "... mothers at home need someone who is educationally oriented and focused [with whom] to discuss their children's futures, goals and methods of formal training and management."

- Be sensitive to the struggles of the parents you are visiting, the barriers they are striving to overcome.

  > "She tries to cope. . . and still be a good mother [with] her children's interest at heart."

  > "You must put yourself in their circumstances and go from there. You need to show love and caring."

In a post-project interview, one parent was asked, "What kinds of things did you learn from [the mentor]?" She replied with one word: "Friendship." Many of the

comments we collected from the project parents, in fact, focused on the relationship that developed during the home visits:

- "I was delighted to have someone coming to see *me*."
- "She was my mentor, too. I said, please come spend some time with me because I really need to talk . . . and she did."
- "It was really nice for somebody to come to the house and talk to you, that you could talk to comfortably."
- "She actually helped with a lot of things. . . I could talk to her about anything."
- "She's the type of person that she'll do anything with you. She's that caring person."

The home-visiting mentors also reported outcomes associated with this relationship-building which they felt were as important as the achievement of their literacy goals:

- "The encouragement [I offered] helps fight the sense of hopelessness that characterizes the parents' lives."
- "I tried to help the mother with her life — almost counseling."
- "For one single father, I provided a lot of support, helping him get organized. . . "
- "This mother did not have a mother herself; she needed someone to talk to."
- "When I finally got [a mother with reading difficulties] to sit down and read to her child, she looked up at me and said, `I think I need to go back to school.'"

KEEPING IT GOING (TEACHING THE PARENTS)

The effort and reward of maintaining your focus on the parents are reflected in these comments from project mentors:

- "I had a demonstration project for one visit to see how effective mother is in spending time with [her daughter]."

- "Mother . . . shares some part of the activity with us . . . [the daughter] is happy; no, elated, when her mother takes this special time with her."

- "[Mother] helped [her daughter] cut pictures and paste them to make a book while we talked."

Once you've gained the trust of the parents, plan a strategy for each family that fits the unique relationship you've established.

The project mentors reported unanimously that "flexibility" is a key component of any successful home visit. Certainly each family is different, and each visit to the same family involves a unique set of circumstances. Making last-minute adjustments to your plan without losing your focus is probably the most difficult challenge of an established home-visit program.

- "The mother and I [made our plans] together."

- "We played a game of Wizard of Oz (at [mother's] suggestion) during the book time."

- ". . . [mother] took control of our hour. She obviously had gone over in her mind what she needed to do, and she read, and glued the flowers . . . and her little girl beamed with such pride!"

Project designers must possess a certain degree of flexibility, too. In Beaver County, several mentors found themselves helping parents develop methods for communicating with public school teachers and other personnel.

- "[The mentor] will go to school with you and talk to the teacher . . . [she] won't be as emotionally involved and will know how to talk on your behalf."

- "I use those books that she brought for us, *How To Prepare Your Child, What Your Child Should Know* . . . I have written notes out of these books."

- [The mentor] also offered to come and talk to teachers about what they did that worked or was helpful."

Facilitating parent-school communication was not listed among the original project goals and objectives. However, the very real needs of the parents could not be

ignored, and these activities certainly fit within the project's broad goal of improving family literacy.

Sometimes, convincing the parents to participate in your activities involves communication about basic parenting skills:

- "One mom just talked AT her kids; I helped her learn to talk TO her kids, and she got pretty good at it, asking them questions after school about their day and so on."
- "When I gave instructions, I expected the mothers to practice what I suggested, and told them I wanted to hear how it went when I came back."
- "The mother in the family just didn't seem to have much time for the child."
- "When I started, the mothers were too busy, not aware of their role as their children's primary teacher. They needed someone to bring that to their attention."

In some families, the literacy activities exposed parental anxieties and difficulties, requiring tactful guidance and support from the mentors:

- "I demonstrated games [the mother] could play that would help her child, that didn't require reading."
- "[Mother] is very anxious to see that her girls are not handicapped like she is about reading."
- "I told her . . . next month we would take her books from the Literacy Center and work with them . . . together."
- "When I showed her things she could do with [her son] using her limited skills, she opened up."

True flexibility also involves a willingness to do "whatever it takes" to engage the family, and to work with any family members who are receptive:

- "I saw more of the father, and the older sister [than the mother].
- "In one family, we took turns reading aloud, just [passing] the book around."

- "[Father] showed a quick interest in the new set of books I brought; joined in the discussion and some reading."

- "Her husband is responsive . . . whenever he's there. I know he reads to [his son]."

- "Both [older brothers] are involved in our activities. . . we are all having fun and the stories put [the baby] to sleep! (Thank goodness)."

The parents appreciated this aspect of the project as well:

- "He's ten years old. . . and cannot read very well, so he looks forward to her coming."

- "That's a program you need, for the older children. You have one for the adults. . . one for the younger children, you need something for the children in the middle."

There are limits to the value of flexibility, too, and a careful balance must be struck. By planning and sticking to a specific visitation schedule, you are providing structure for a family as well as modeling the concept of consistency. The ongoing, dependable quality of your home-visiting relationship is critical to your success at establishing a relationship, and achieving your project goals:

- "[My families] are leading very difficult lives, and needed steady encouragement."

When your strategy is really working, you will notice outcomes that reflect personal growth as well as the achievement of your specific goals:

- "We all walked to the library to get the child a library card; the mother got one, too. She didn't realize how much fun the Story Hour was."

- "I have seen. . . pride and closeness in family blossom; [and] structure added to daily life."

Finally, don't neglect the importance of seeking and getting support from your peers. Interaction with other professionals can provide concrete help, such as ideas for specific activities, books, or words to use with parents and children. Such interaction also offers support at an affective level, from others who understand exactly what you are going through and what you're trying to do:

- "I appreciated meeting with the other mentors; we appreciated each other's efforts and experiences."

WRAPPING IT UP

It is difficult to measure the amount of your success at the end of a home-visiting project. As noted before, many positive results would not be revealed by standard testing or analysis. The parents and mentors in this project noted some examples of outcomes that seemed to reflect success:

- *Changes in parents' self-perceptions:*

  Mentor: "The experience was very good for the mother's self-esteem."

- *Changes in parental behavior:*

  Mentor: "The child asked me one day, "Guess what we did last night?" The mother had been playing the `missing object' game I taught her."

  Mentor: ". . . [through] the program's support she and [her daughter] will have many important moments together over the storybooks."

  Mentor: "I tried to help the mother understand that she could get help wherever she was."

  Parent: "I would know why we were doing it; not just to be doing something, it's to teach the child this and this."

  Parent: "It helped me teach my child, most definitely. I learned. . . how everything that is even said or goes on turns into a lesson."

- *Changes in children's behavior:*

  Parent: "The kids have more interest in. . . picking up the books more."

  Parent: "They want to sit down and read the books. They used to just want to go out and play."

Parent: "He cut completely around [the circle. His fine motor skills] really improved because of this program."

- *Memories of contact with a caring person:*

  Mentor: "By the end of [a few months' visiting] I felt very close — like part of the family."

  Mentor: "I learned to love the children as though they were my own grandchildren."

  Parent: "I love [the program] and I love her. I'm going to miss her."

CONCLUSION

As the Generations Together project concluded in Beaver and Allegheny Counties, the mentors remained generally positive about the project and the families with whom they worked, despite the difficulties they will continue to face. The parents in this relatively short project demonstrated an ability to appreciate and make use of the extra support provided by the mentors:

- "I was amazed at how much progress the families — parents and children — made in such a short time."

Mentors and project administrators feel that there is an underlying message of hope in this, a message that permits an attitude of optimism that is an essential tool for any home visitor. The project's success was strongly related to one important fact:

- "The mothers really wanted to help their kids."

This positive attitude was expressed another way by this mentor:

- "Most of the mothers didn't realize how they were helping their children, how much they *could* help their children."

- "Many young parents don't want to say/admit that they could use a parenting class — with us they don't need to. They can pick up hints from our behavior and ask questions when we are just talking. . ."

The mentors were successful because they approached parents and families with a belief that they were already making a positive contribution to their children's lives, and the expectation that they will be willing to work on improving their contributions.

APPENDIX 1

Checklist of Home Visiting Tips

- ☐ Learn the general characteristics of adult learning styles.
- ☐ Create and maintain a relaxed, positive approach to the teaching experience.
- ☐ Help parents become active partners in diagnosing their own needs and formulating objectives in the context of their parenting.
- ☐ Articulate the outcomes you are seeking in the form of specific goals.
- ☐ Find a level of commonality and shared goals with each parent.
- ☐ Communicate as clearly as possible.
- ☐ Maintain a positive, nonjudgmental attitude.
- ☐ Treat your time with the family as a learning partnership; be conscientious about getting the parents' input and opinions.
- ☐ Be sensitive to the struggles of the parents you are visiting and the barriers they are striving to overcome.
- ☐ Plan a strategy for each family that fits the unique relationship you've established.
- ☐ Be flexible; adapt your plans to individual families and the conditions of the day you visit, and adapt your overall strategies to changing situations and perceptions.
- ☐ Plan and stick to a specific visitation schedule.
- ☐ Seek ways to get support from your peers.
- ☐ Maintain the attitude of optimism that is an essential tool for any home visitor.
- ☐ Approach your work with the belief that parents and families are already making a positive contribution to their children's lives, and the expectation that they will be willing to work on improving their contributions.

APPENDIX 2

What We Did:
A Starter List of Family Literacy Activities

Literacy at its most basic level involves skills besides letter recognition and knowing how to start at the proper side of the page. These skills include:

- Social and emotional development (children who feel good about themselves are more open to and capable of learning).
- Physical development (seeing, hearing, sitting still and holding a book!).
- Cognitive development (the ability to think symbolically; the use of language).

A family literacy home visitor should model a rich mixture of activities to teach, reinforce, and otherwise develop these basic abilities. Parents should be as closely involved as possible, either actually participating or at least watching and discussing the activity as the child performs it. The home visitor should also model a range of discussion techniques (especially open-ended questions) that greatly enhance the value of any activity.

In addition to modeling, home visitors should be prepared to explain these concepts, and the value of the activities, in language that is accessible to the parents.

indoors

"We have stayed mainly in the kitchen."

paint and color
scribble and draw
do puzzles
make puzzles (e.g. from a cereal box)
read books
tell stories
make books
play board games
recycle
make a bookcase
make posters
make picture cards
make water glass music
make a fan
guess-what? (items in bag)
hide-the-object
make greeting cards
make "big body" silhouettes
make paper bag puppets
have a puppet show
make play dough
make pasta jewelry
sink-or-float?
build with blocks
compare family photos
make dolls
grow plants
sing songs
fingerplays and action rhymes

outdoors:

"Anywhere is a good place to learn."

find/identify objects from nature
make a terrarium
use a magnifying glass
blow bubbles
identify wildflowers
hug trees
make bird feeders
active games, sports
take photos
roller skate
picnic
fishing
plant seeds

trips:

museum
library
county fair
fruit and flower store
fabric store
clothing store
restaurant
cemetery

Cooking:

bake cookies
make pudding
make gingerbread
make soup
make fruited jello
make ice cream sodas
make ice cream